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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3284
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 6352
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007132

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PACOM FOR FPA HUSO
NSC FOR MORROW

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KDEM TH

SUBJECT: THAI CABINET APPROVES PARTIAL LIFTING OF MARTIAL LAW

Classified By: Charge Alexander A. Arvizu, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Thai cabinet decided on November 28 to lift martial law in Bangkok and several other provinces, although they will retain it for now in the troubled South and in areas viewed as pro-Thaksin strongholds. Lifting martial law, particularly in the capital, is welcome, but the decision to retain it in other areas, while not unexpected, is disappointing. We will forward a complete list of the areas remaining under martial law as soon as it is available.

We will continue to press for the full lifting of martial law at the earliest possible date. End summary.

12. (C) The Thai cabinet today agreed to lift martial law in Bangkok and 40 provinces, but will exclude at least some districts of 35 other provinces for now. The government went further than the Council for National Security (CNS) advised: CNS head General Sonthi Boonyartglin announced on Monday that the CNS would recommend martial law be retained in Bangkok, the South, and a number of provinces which are considered to be strongholds of support for former Prime Minister Thaksin. According to news reports, General Sonthi told the press, however, that it was "up to the government" whether to lift martial law in Bangkok and other provinces or not.

Half a loaf

13. (C) The Cabinet announcement today splits the baby. Lifting martial law but retaining it in the capital, as recommended by the CNS, would have been very poorly received by many Thais. At the same time, the government remains skittish about the activities of ex-PM Thaksin, who continues to wander about the region, vacationing in Bali and shopping in Hong Kong. with his every move reported widely here in Thai media. Contacts across the board - government, military, NGO, press -- allege that he continues to pay supporters in the countryside, and maintains the ability to mobilize a large number of protesters or individuals to potentially engage in disruptive actions. The decision to retain martial law in Thaksin strongholds and some border areas reflects these concerns. (Note: Martial law has been in effect in some districts of 19 border provinces since 1991; see note, paragraph 7, for further background.)

14. (C) Both General Sonthi and Prime Minister Surayud are on public record stating that martial law would be lifted before the end of the year, including in interviews with international broadcast media. In addition, PM Surayud told us that martial law would be lifted in conjunction with the King' birthday (Thailand's national day) on December 5, and he conveyed the same message to President Bush on the margins of the APEC meeting in Hanoi. The decision today may represent the first step in a plan to phase out martial law, but the government has not stated this outright, leaving its plans for lifting martial law in the rest of the country unclear.

15. (C) Thai society remains split on the issue of martial law. Some contacts in Bangkok -- even some members of the opposition parties -- say that martial law has little practical effect on people, as the government is not actually enforcing restrictions on gathering, protest, etc. Others, particularly NGO contacts, are more critical of the government. Even the normally apolitical Thai Rath newspaper -- the most widely-read paper in the country -- urged the government in a recent editorial to end martial law. (Although the chief reason given was the damage to Thailand's international reputation, not concerns about limits on political expression.)

Comment

16. (C) Bangkok is the center of political activity in the country, and the decision to lift martial law here will contribute to a more open political environment. Removing

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this limitation in Bangkok will defuse much of the remaining internal criticism, since Bangkok politicians and activists are less likely to press this issue if they are not under restriction themselves, and with elections much further down the road. That said, the decision is, on balance, a disappointing half-measure that makes the CNS and government seem intimidated by Thaksin's long shadow (and deep pockets).

We will continue to encourage the lifting of martial law in the remaining areas as soon as possible. End comment.

Note

17. (U) 19 Thai border provinces have had martial law in place in some districts ever since 1991, although the provisions of martial law have not been enforced. Martial law was declared in these districts by the National Peace-Keeping Council in 1991, and was renewed in 1998. It was replaced in the three southern, Malay-majority provinces by the 2005 Emergency Decree, but remained in effect in the other districts. This little-known circumstance may further complicate decision-making on ending martial law; the current government is unlikely to disturb long-standing security provisions in the border areas by revoking martial law in these districts. End note.

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